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**Europe in the face of predatory  
hegemony and hard power***Europe in the face of predatory hegemony and hard  
power***Abstract:**

*This article examines how the dynamics of the ongoing geopolitical shift affect the Euro-Atlantic space, using a framework structured around several interconnected axes. First, it draws a historical analogy between the European Union's (EU) current geopolitical environment and Cinquecento Italy to highlight the vulnerabilities of an economic power that lacks its own security architecture. This serves as a foundation for a second analysis: the dichotomy between Europe's geopolitical significance and the risk of descending into a state of structural "vassalage" toward external powers.*

*The article then scrutinizes the nature of the relationship with the United States (U.S.) to determine whether its behaviour corresponds to that of a predatory ally, particularly within an Atlantic Alliance shifting toward a purely transactional model.*

**Keywords:**

*Alliance, strategic autonomy, spheres of influence, Europe, geopolitics, NATO, realism, European Union.*

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## Introduction

We stand at the threshold of a post-liberal<sup>1</sup> era in which multilateral governance yields to unvarnished realism<sup>2</sup>. In this new scenario, Westphalian sovereignty, industrial robustness, and the capacity for military power projection reassert themselves as the only decisive factors for state survival.

“Institutions designed in the ashes of the Second World War are being challenged”<sup>3</sup> by the emergence of power blocs with their own strategic identities, which once again impose the logic of spheres of influence<sup>4</sup> and regional hegemonies. Consequently, the immediate geographical space is redefined as a theatre of perpetual competition, where the presence of an adversary is perceived as a direct challenge to sovereign integrity.

Contemporary Europe presents itself as an economic giant lacking an autonomous security architecture. This absence of institutionalized hard power condemns the continent to systemic vulnerability, in which internal prosperity is subordinated to external security guarantees.

From this perspective, the study examines the dichotomy that defines Europe’s position: its normative centrality versus the imminent risk of structural “vassalage.” In this context, it becomes imperative to reassess the nature of the transatlantic bond. The analysis questions whether current U.S. practice is shifting from benevolent leadership toward the role of a “predatory ally.”

Only two years ago, the strategic debate in the Euro-Atlantic space revolved around the advisability—and feasibility—of NATO adopting a so-called “global vision.” That discussion, still framed within a logic of gradual adaptation of the liberal international order, has been abruptly overtaken by events. The Alliance’s purported “brain death”<sup>5</sup> has been reversed not by normative consensus, but by the eruption of an existential crisis

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, Bound to Fail John J. Mearsheimer. The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order, International Security, vol. 43, n. º 4 (2019), pp. 7–50.

<sup>2</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. Theory of International Politics. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Speech by Blaise Metreweli, Chief of SIS UK, 15 December 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-by-blaise-metreweli-chief-of-sis-15-december-2025>. [Accessed: 21/12/2025].

<sup>4</sup> MELIÁN NEGRÍN, Miguel Á. El retorno a las esferas de influencia. Documento de Opinión IEEE 62/2025. [https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320887/esferas+de+influenica\\_2025\\_dieeee62.pdf/ac13fe03-512a-c094-ac1e-b5d2442d2082?t=1756715648928](https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320887/esferas+de+influenica_2025_dieeee62.pdf/ac13fe03-512a-c094-ac1e-b5d2442d2082?t=1756715648928). [Accessed: 19/01/2026].

<sup>5</sup> Félix Arteaga El presidente Macron y la “muerte cerebral” de la OTAN. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/el-presidente-macron-y-la-muerte-cerebral-de-la-otan/>. [Accessed: 21/12/2025].

that has stripped allies of their strategic ambiguities, compelling them to acknowledge, without equivocation, the existence of a profound existential crisis shaking the foundations of the security architecture that has underpinned the transatlantic order since the signing of the Washington Treaty in 1949<sup>6</sup>.

### **Cinquecento Italy as a mirror of strategic impotence**

To clearly convey the magnitude of the strategic challenge confronting Europe, its most rigorous historical analogy should not be sought in the bipolar paralysis of the Cold War, but rather in the vulnerability of the Italian states of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Like Florence, Milan, or Naples, the contemporary EU represents the zenith of economic, cultural, and administrative sophistication. Yet it shares with those regional powers a partially delegated sovereignty and a fragmentation in defence that renders it ineffective vis-à-vis actors explicitly willing to employ military power.

This historical analogy makes it possible, first, to identify a structural dependence on U.S. security comparable to the way in which the Italian states oscillated between the power orbits of the Valois and the Habsburgs. In both cases, the protector may act—according to the imperatives of its own interests—either as an indispensable ally or as a predatory one, capable of imposing its industrial, energy, and strategic priorities to the detriment of the sovereign needs of those it protects.

Second, the EU reproduces the fundamental paradox of sixteenth-century Italy: extraordinary commercial wealth unsupported by a proportional military capacity. In an international system that is reverting to territorial conceptions of geopolitics—manifested not only in Russian revisionism or China's systemic expansion, but also in U.S. ambitions regarding Greenland and Canada, which are not mere territorial caprices but strategic moves aimed at securing control over Arctic resources, even at the expense of the sovereign integrity of allies such as Canada and Denmark—European soft power proves as ineffective as humanist diplomacy was in the face of the professional armies of the sixteenth century.

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<sup>6</sup> NATO. North Atlantic Treaty. Washington, D.C., April 4, 1949. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty?selectedLocale=es>. [Accessed: 19/12/2025].

Ultimately, the analogy between the Mediterranean of the Cinquecento and today's Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters yields a clear lesson: political entities incapable of consolidating centralized power and autonomous military capacity ultimately become objects, rather than subjects, of international politics.

### **The European Union: Irrelevance and Vassalage.**

In light of the foregoing, the response to this challenge is not unequivocal, but it is revealing: Europe is no longer the normative center of the international system, but rather a zone of contestation among great powers, compelled—by its failure to act earlier—to redefine its strategic autonomy under structurally unfavourable conditions.

At a supranational level, the EU finds itself caught in a geoeconomic pincer movement. While Putin's Russia employs territorial revisionism as a constant shock instrument on the eastern flank—directly threatening the existence of sovereign states—Xi Jinping's China exerts a form of systemic competition that erodes the continent's industrial base.

At the same time, the disdain reflected in repeated statements from Washington regarding NATO's collective security places EU member states in a position of asymmetric vulnerability. The attempt to commodify defence—conditioning military assistance on the fulfilment of spending quotas or on the concession of economic and territorial interests (as in the case of Greenland)—undermines the principle of the indivisibility of security. Individually, European states lack the critical mass to negotiate effectively with Russia (to a certain extent) and with a Washington that no longer seeks allies, but rather clients or buffer states.

As a collective actor, the EU faces a structural paradox. It possesses economic, regulatory, and demographic weight that places it among the principal poles of global power, yet it lacks the military instruments and political cohesion necessary to translate that capacity into autonomous strategic influence. This dissociation recalls the experience of nineteenth-century<sup>7</sup> commercial powers which, despite their economic weight,

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<sup>7</sup> States such as the Netherlands, Belgium, the Italian states prior to unification, or the Hanseatic cities attained significant economic and commercial weight, yet lacked sufficient autonomous military capacity and depended on external security guarantees (the United Kingdom, France, Austria, Prussia). Bairoch, Paul. *Victoires et déboires: histoire économique et sociale du monde du XVIe siècle à nos jours* (3 vols). Gallimard, 1997.

depended on other actors for the provision of their security. Conceptually, this situation fit within a classical Westphalian system, in which the different dimensions of power—economic and military—were not necessarily integrated within the same actors. In the current context, however, the fundamental difference is that such dissociation has ceased to be structurally stable and now constitutes a factor that constrains the EU's ability to act as a fully autonomous pole of power.

From a comparative perspective, the EU resembles an empire without an army or a confederation in a state of incomplete consolidation, comparable to pre-unification Germany or to Europe under the League of Nations: rich in norms, poor in coercion. Consequently, in an environment dominated by the return of power politics, this asymmetry severely limits its room for manoeuvre.

### ***Member States individually***

If the EU as a bloc suffers from a dissonance between economic and strategic capabilities, its member states, considered individually, face an even more complex situation, as they lack the critical mass and strategic depth required to engage in symmetrical negotiations with actors such as the Russian Federation or the United States. With regard to Moscow, the absence of an integrated defence constrains deterrence capacity; with regard to Washington, the lack of a single voice condemns European states to an asymmetric relationship in which security is negotiated in exchange for economic concessions and technological subordination. Consequently, without a form of strategic autonomy capable of aggregating their demographic, economic, and military weight, European countries are driven toward systemic irrelevance, operating not as interlocutors with their own agency, but as containment spaces or captive markets within a security architecture designed and directed from extra-European centers of power.

It appears that member states prefer this condition of vassalage to ceding spheres of sovereignty to the Union as a whole.

Historical comparison is particularly illuminating in understanding the current strategic divergences within Europe, where today's fragmentation of interests evokes the most critical fractures of the twentieth century. States on the eastern flank—Poland, the Baltic states, Romania—experience a situation comparable to that of frontier states

during the early Cold War. Given their geographical contiguity with a revisionist Russia, these actors find themselves in a condition of maximum exposure, which results in an existential dependence on the U.S. security umbrella. For them, any ambiguity on the part of Washington amounts to an existential risk.

By contrast, the traditional powers of northwestern Europe, most notably France and Germany, behave as actors in a post-imperial system that seek to preserve global influence without having fully assumed, to date, the costs and sacrifices required for the projection of effective hard power. France maintains an aspiration to strategic autonomy, underpinned by significant military capabilities, while Germany remains caught between its economic weight and its historical reluctance to assume military leadership.

Smaller states and those of southern Europe, for their part, face an additional layer of structural vulnerability: energy dependence, economic pressure, and exposure to great-power competition dynamics without any real capacity to influence them. This fragmentation recalls interwar Europe, where the absence of a shared strategy reduced medium and small states to the condition of passive objects, depriving them of their role as sovereign actors in international politics.

### ***Is the United States a Predatory Ally?***

To understand the current situation, it is imperative to examine the evolution of the United States' projection of power.

Since the end of the Second World War, the global order has gravitated around Washington, establishing a symbiotic relationship with its allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. However, the logic of U.S. foreign policy has undergone a critical transition. We have moved from a model of "benevolent hegemony"—grounded in the provision of stability as a public good and in multilateral consensus—toward a configuration of "predatory hegemony" that contrasts sharply with the image projected by the United States after 1945 (the Marshall Plan). Today, the prevailing perception is increasingly that of an actor that views the prosperity of others as a threat to its own economic and industrial competitiveness.

From a realist perspective, the guiding thread of U.S. foreign policy has displayed an unbroken continuity: the preservation of global primacy. While the postwar period was structured through multilateral institutions (Bretton Woods: the IMF, World Bank, GATT) and security regimes (NATO), which offered reconstruction incentives in exchange for alignment, the current absence of a truly peer systemic counterweight has exacerbated the asymmetries inherent in the Atlantic and transpacific bargains. For this reason, the concept of a “predatory ally” acquires analytical validity to describe a power that, without engaging in formal hostility (for the time being), instrumentalizes its dominant position to subordinate the national agendas of its partners to the imperatives of its own national security.

This dynamic manifests through three vectors of coercion. First, the use of the dollar and the global payments system as instruments of unilateral sanctions. By imposing domestic legal frameworks extraterritorially, Washington compels European powers to comply with U.S. geopolitical objectives under the threat of financial exclusion. Second, within NATO, Washington demands increased military expenditure from its allies while simultaneously steering that expenditure toward U.S.-origin systems and platforms, thereby reinforcing its military–industrial complex. Third, through recent legislative initiatives such as the Inflation Reduction Act<sup>8</sup>, which contravene World Trade Organization (WTO) principles and function as mechanisms for siphoning capital and industrial capabilities from the European continent to U.S. soil.

The EU represents the paradigmatic case of this subordination. Despite NATO’s revitalization following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Europe’s structural dependence on intelligence, nuclear deterrence, and— increasingly—on liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies has relegated it to the role of a strategic client. Forced alignment in the systemic competition against China—a critical market for European industry—demonstrates that Washington prioritizes the geoeconomic containment of Beijing over the commercial interests of its allies.

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<sup>8</sup> The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-169, 136 Stat. 1818 (2022). Through protectionist clauses in clean technology subsidies, this legislation creates a competitive disadvantage for European companies and a risk of divestment. It has benefited American industry via subsidies and indirect barriers, attracting European investment and undermining the industrial competitiveness of strategic partners, even in key sectors such as the energy transition

The explicit shift in Washington's strategic posture, formalized in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of November 2025<sup>9</sup>, does not introduce a flexible<sup>10</sup> realism<sup>11</sup> ex novo, but rather doctrinally consolidates an evolution initiated after the close of the counterinsurgency wars cycle and the end of liberal<sup>12</sup> interventionism.

In this respect, Barry Posen's thesis is validated. As early as 2014, he argued that "the net gain the United States derives from its alliance relationships is considerably lower than during the Cold War and no longer corresponds to their cost."<sup>13</sup> In other words, the strategic benefit no longer compensates for the operational expense; consequently, Washington brings an end to the asymmetric provision of security, transforming allied protection into a form of servitude conditioned on tangible economic reciprocity.

The Hague Summit of June 2025<sup>14</sup> marked the breaking point. What began as a demand to correct financial imbalances evolved into a reinterpretation of the international role of the United States: no longer as the guarantor of the European order, but as a transactional actor willing to use tariffs and security as bargaining tools. Europe has ceased to be a privileged partner and has become an asset whose value depends on its direct contribution to U.S. national objectives.

The most alarming symptom of this strategic drift is the explicit U.S. ambition toward Canada and, most notably, Greenland. The fact that a NATO leader openly questions the sovereignty of its own allies—justifying it as a vital national security necessity—shatters a historical taboo within the Alliance and resurrects the imperial logic of spheres of influence<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> US.National Security Strategy (NSS) of November 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>. [Accessed: 21/12/2025].

<sup>10</sup> It is necessary to qualify that the 2025 National Security Strategy does not fall within a "flexible realism" in the strict sense, but rather reflects a formulation of hardened structural realism, characterized by a transactional conception of alliances and an explicit subordination of multilateralism to criteria of immediate strategic utility.

<sup>11</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. pp. 29–54.

<sup>12</sup> Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge. Washington, D.C., 2018. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF> [Accessed: 21/12/2025].

<sup>13</sup> Posen, B. R. (2014). *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Cornell University Press, pág. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Cumbre de la OTAN de La Haya 2025: Resultados estratégicos y cuestiones clave. <https://behorizon.org/nato-summit-the-hague-2025-strategic-outcomes-and-key-issues/>. [Accessed: 19/01/2026].

<sup>15</sup> Colom Piella, Guillem; Sanchez Díez, Sonia. *Esferas de influencia. El mapa invisible de la competición entre grandes potencias* pp.945-947. [Accessed: 25/01/2026].

## ***A transactional NATO?***

The Atlantic Alliance is undergoing a phase of strategic adjustment profoundly shaped by the evolution of U.S. foreign policy. As Washington advances a hemispheric recentralization of power oriented toward its expanded immediate neighbourhood—under the influence of the “Trump Corollary”<sup>16</sup> to the Monroe Doctrine<sup>17</sup>—and clearly structures its security policy around the protection of its national territory, the stability of the Western Hemisphere<sup>18</sup>, and systemic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific, NATO, out of step, finds itself in a process of strategic recalibration.

Although Washington’s new policies do not formally call its membership in the Alliance into question, they compel NATO to redefine its operational logic by introducing a more pronounced political conditionality in terms of defence spending, military contributions, and strategic alignment.

The U.S. emphasis on burden-sharing and the strategic return on NATO embeds an openly transactional prism of security, in which the protection of the ally ceases to be considered a vital interest per se and becomes contingent upon the ally’s direct contribution to U.S. security<sup>19</sup>. This approach transforms the logic of collective defence into a network of conditional relationships, where U.S. military supremacy functions as an instrument of selective protection, closely tied to the strength of its industrial and economic base. This, in turn, erodes the credibility of extended deterrence—the central pillar of Euro-Atlantic security—and conditions decisions on the use of force, command structures, interoperability, defence planning, and collective strategic credibility. As a result, critical questions arise regarding the future viability of allied consensus, the practical robustness of the Washington Treaty, burden-sharing equilibrium, and,

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<sup>16</sup> Which has come to be known as 'Donroe'—that is to say, a Monroe 2.0 that combines an updated regional hegemony with pre-emptive coercion and great power competition.

<sup>17</sup> Sexton, J. (2011) The Monroe Doctrine. [Edition unavailable]. Hill and Wang. Reading available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/4377058/the-monroe-doctrine-empire-and-nation-in-nineteenthcentury-america-pdf>. [Accessed: 21/01/2026].

<sup>18</sup> For the United States, the Western Hemisphere encompasses Canada and Mexico as terrestrial and aerial depth, while the Caribbean serves as a zone for maritime control and approach. Central America is viewed as a belt of stability and containment, whereas South America is regarded as a space for strategic resources and the prevention of adversary presence. Furthermore, the Western Arctic, including Greenland, has become an emerging axis for early warning and strategic control.

<sup>19</sup> US National Defence Strategy (NDS) (January 2026). <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>. [Accessed: 24/01/2026].

ultimately, NATO's very nature as a political-military alliance in an environment of systemic competition.

Under these circumstances, in the realm of deterrence, NATO seeks to compensate for these uncertainties through the reinforcement of European conventional capabilities, particularly on the eastern flank, albeit unevenly and with structural limitations that affect the credibility of deterrence.

Internal cohesion is increasingly strained by growing differentiation among allies according to their level of commitment and alignment with Washington's priorities<sup>20</sup>. This dynamic reinforces fragmentation tendencies and weakens the Alliance's integrative character, further conditioned by strategic planning that encompasses geostrategic scenarios extending beyond continental Europe, with a growing emphasis on the Arctic and Greenland as key arenas of U.S. strategic competition with Russia and China, thereby redefining the scope of Euro-Atlantic security.

Its future appears to lie not in its disappearance or irrelevance, but rather in a process of transformation, given that, for the time being, it remains useful<sup>21</sup> to the US as a risk management tool in Europe; however, it no longer constitutes the exclusive axis of its global strategy. For European allies, it remains indispensable, although their structural dependence on an increasingly conditional American leadership poses strategic dilemmas for the future

### **Russia: The Direct Threat and the Return of Territorial Geopolitics**

In contrast to U.S. ambiguity, Russia represents a clear and conventionally geopolitical threat. Its strategy toward Europe is based on military coercion, hybrid warfare, and the exploitation of internal divisions. From this perspective, Europe's situation recalls that of states neighbouring revisionist powers during periods of power transition, such as Central Europe vis-à-vis Germany in the 1930s.

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<sup>20</sup> Statements at the World Economic Forum (Davos, January 2026): In his address on 22 January 2026, Donald Trump directly singled out European allies—with a specific mention of Spain's lack of commitment—to raise defence spending from the previous 2% to a new 5% target. He labelled those failing to reach this figure as 'free riders.'

<sup>21</sup> Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press, 1987. pp.6-11.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that European deterrence, without U.S. backing, is insufficient. At the same time, it has exposed the EU's inability to act as a security guarantor in its own neighbourhood, reinforcing the perception of structural dependence.

### **China: The Systemic Competitor and Long-Term Pressure**

Unlike Russia, China does not constitute an immediate military threat to Europe, but it does represent a long-term strategic challenge. Its economic, technological, and normative competition undermines Europe's industrial base and its decisional autonomy. In historical terms, China plays a role comparable to that of a rising power within a multipolar system, forcing Europe to choose between alignment, accommodation, or autonomy.

This Chinese pressure overlaps with transatlantic tensions, further narrowing Europe's room for manoeuvre between great powers without becoming a subordinate actor

### **Conclusion.**

Europe finds itself simultaneously subjected to direct Russian pressure on its eastern flank, systemic competition from China as an emerging global power, and the ambiguity—if not open political coercion—of its traditional ally and ultimate security guarantor, the United States. This triple pressure places the continent before a historical turning point. Real strategic autonomy, defined as the effective capacity for sovereign decision-making backed by credible military means, is no longer a mere political aspiration but a prerequisite for strategic survival.

Unlike the Italian states of the Cinquecento, Europe possesses the economic, technological, and industrial resources necessary to sustain its own security. What is lacking is not material capacity, but political will, strategic clarity, and a readiness to assume the costs and responsibilities of power. The alternative is clear: either consolidate itself as a strategic actor with autonomous deterrent capacity, or slide toward irrelevance in an increasingly competitive international system.

Without further delay, this moment constitutes a decisive test of geopolitical maturity for the European project. Absent political cohesion and a direct assumption of responsibility

in defence matters, the continuation of the status quo implies the tacit acceptance of a diminishing strategic sovereignty. Political coercion and the transformation of the transatlantic bond only reinforce this sense of urgency.

European strategic autonomy must be translated into concrete decisions in the defence realm: effective integration of military capabilities, sustained investment in hard power, development of an autonomous defence industrial and technological base, doctrinal clarification of Europe's role within—or, if necessary, beyond—NATO, and the consolidation of a shared strategic culture. This is not about replacing the United States or undermining the Atlantic Alliance, but about restoring the internal balance of an asymmetric relationship and preserving the credibility of collective deterrence.

The relationship with the United States has evolved from an alliance grounded in shared values and structural commitments toward an increasingly transactional partnership. The principal risk is not an abrupt rupture, but the gradual hollowing out of security guarantees. In this context, European dependence ceases to be an asset and becomes a strategic vulnerability.

NATO will remain a central pillar, but its future effectiveness will increasingly depend on Europe's ability to assume a credible and autonomous military role. In an international system marked by coercion, deterrence once again becomes the central language of power.

If Europe does not act, other actors—including its predatory ally—will decide for it.

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